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ABSTRACT

Trying to be fair to all students is one of the most difficult professional responsibilities of the community college professor. Yet it is especially important as the community college, more than any other segment of public higher education, must adhere to the goals of universal access and equal opportunity. Furthermore, students' conceptions of the community college experience may be their first or only model of American higher education--the significance of their experiences must not be underestimated. However, fairness is a philosophically difficult objective. A professor may, for example, choose a computer-graded examination for a Shakespeare course in order to avoid the subjectivity involved in grading term papers. By doing so, though, the instructor is penalizing students who prefer to write. Also, when making allowances for students' unforeseen personal problems, the professor faces the difficulty of disassociating her/himself from the rigid academia which he/she experienced. The instructor must remember that today's community college student is more likely to have a job, live at home, and have family responsibilities--is therefore more likely to encounter problems that will affect his/her academic performance. Still, the professor must decide if granting special privileges because of personal problems is unfair to students without such problems. (JP)

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FAIRNESS: SUBJECTIVITY OR THE COMPUTER, A FACULTY MEMBER'S DILEMMA

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Few areas trouble most of us more than trying to be fair, to students, to other faculty, and to ourselves. I find that once one goes past the survival stage which accompanies the first year or so of teaching, professional adaptation takes place and the focus on trying to be fair is clear, sharp, and unremitting.

The question then which concerns me is: how can a community college professor be fair to all? Certainly, it is often expected that in more than any other segment of public higher education, that the community college should attempt to adhere to the national goals which promote univeral access and equal opportunity. Treating students fairly and equally is no small matter in seeing that these goals are carried out successfully. For many students, the community college may be their first and only model of American higher education. Thus the significance of students' experiences cannot be underestimated.

What promoted my concern was overhearing a remark from a teacher of Shakespeare who was preparing a computer examination for his classes. My initial reaction would be

to say that such a test was not fair--not fair to those who like to write, not fair to those who must make mellow and lingering judgments which best fit into term papers produced by a review of critics, by a fencing in the dark of inner souls. Can I be forgiven for having to prepare a term paper on "The Transmutation of Sources in Twelfth Night" and thinking that I had accomplished something when I was finished? The professor who read it was very critical and could easily be called subjective and demanding. But he was superb and one could easily have searched a lifetime to find one as knowledgeable and brilliant as he.

Still there is the doubt that we as community college teachers have the right to be subjective or critically evaluative of our students. The Shakespeare teacher I overheard was right in many respects. Students seem to believe grades are more fairly given if they are on a number basis, particularly if they are given computer type examinations. The heavy black pencil and ricochetted cards have more impartiality and credibility than the instructor's judgment.

What renders decisions even more difficult is in the area of personal problems. Deadlines must be adjusted to mollify a weary student population. Grading becomes much like handicapping a horse race. The unexpected must be added at any point in the semester just to keep everyone on the track. Perhaps a surprising but true example was a

student who asked to take an exam because his sister-in-law had a baby. Or the student who must leave class for a week because she won a trip to Washington, D.C. from her church. Or the student whose parents are going through a divorce and she asked to be absent to appear on the witness stand. There are more. The importance of these experiences is that students honestly believe it would be unfair to penalize them because of events they cannot control.

Are students wrong to expect privileges where their lives have become burdened with family illness, death, job loss, injury? How do we make it equal for everyone? A student from a recent remedial English class had a serious accident on his motorcycle. He returned to class with both arms in casts, his eyes bloodshot, face bruised, limping. He could not write--in fact, he was lucky to be alive. I offered to find him a tutor who could help him study and write for him as he spoke. Was that fair? Should I announce to the class, "All students who break both arms in a motorcycle accident may have special help?"

The problem is: I want to help them, just as many of my colleagues, just as you do, as well. I am reminded of my first year of teaching in the late sixties. A good solid "C" student had failed the final exam. It puzzled me. When she came in to see me and pick up her notebook, I asked her what had happened. She told me that her mother

had died several weeks before the test. I felt very sad for her. I asked her why she hadn't told me. The fact is, I wanted to know--I still want to know when my students are in need. But I still don't know if it is "fair" to the others.

The needs of students were perhaps not considered to be important while many of us attended four year colleges. Who can forget, particularly as English majors, staying up all night, typing a paper which was either in the professor's hands the next day or we were out, out of class, even out of school. Did we dream those rules? Were the rules really more flexible than we believed or dared to test? I think not. The initiation was endurance/

There are differences now, not just in the time of some ten or twenty years of college revolution and evolution. The community college student often has a part or full time job and often lives at home and participates in family responsibilities. He is often older, but not really at a different place in separating from adolescent environment, while by contrast the four year college student may be housed in a dormitory or apartment away from his family of origin or high school peer group. Thus the community college student may well be in the center of family strife or the very mainstay of financial support.

Finally, the students who are older, in the twenty

five and older category who continue to attend community colleges in great numbers often have major responsibilities, such as family and financial. Circumstances can be so volatile that a single day will signal the beginning of a major life style change: divorce, job transfer, pregnancy, child custody hearings.

What can instructors do to be fair to all this wide range of students? What instruments are fair yet show competencies? I pose the question to ask shall we consider circumstances or exclude them--given computer graded exams or subjective exams? In what methods are the values which we wish to teach; which methods themselves illustrate the lessons of lasting value? I submit that the choices we make in fairness have everything to do with the quality of opportunity offered--and the quality of human dignity remembered.

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